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# Averting War in Northeast Asia: A Proposal□□東北アジアでの戦争勃発を防ぐ －－－ 一提言

**Mel Gurtov**

## Averting War in Northeast Asia: A Proposal

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While the United States and South Korea consider whether or not to accept North Korea's call for an "unconditional" return to the Six Party Talks (6PT) or China's call for multilateral negotiations, Northeast Asia is sliding in the direction of deepening conflict that could lead to war. China-Japan relations, which had been warming since the departure of Koizumi Junichiro, and especially since the victory of the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009, are again in a deep freeze over disputed territory. One consequence is a reorientation of Japan's defense strategy southward, in the direction of the Senkakus (Diaoyutai). Washington is encouraging that shift, as well as closer military cooperation between Japan and South Korea. North-South Korea relations are very tense as the result of the *Cheonan* incident, the North's artillery barrage against a small South Korean island, and revelations of a modern North Korean uranium enrichment plant—all coming in the wake of the Lee Myung Bak administration's almost complete reversal of his predecessors' engagement policies. And China-US relations are increasingly contentious, going beyond the longstanding differences over currency valuation and human rights to include a host of security matters. Even though China-Taiwan relations have improved, U.S. naval activity in the Pacific has picked up, with a number of exercises conducted alone and with allies leading some Chinese analysts to conclude that containment is again prominent on the U.S. policy agenda. And both China and the United States are beefing up their weapons capabilities relevant to the Taiwan Strait.

**US-ROK naval exercise featuring USS George Washington Aircraft Carrier, F-22 and 8,000 military personnel in Japan Sea, July, 2010**

A bipolar lineup, reminiscent of the Cold War, is shaping up, with China, Russia, and North Korea on one side, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and India on the other—with each side competing for the affections of the ten Southeast Asian countries grouped under ASEAN. Despite substantial economic ties between all these countries—even between the two Koreas, until Lee Myung Bak suspended trade with the North last spring—their political and strategic divisions are wide and deep.




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President Hu Jintao's January 19, 2011 visit to Washington provides the occasion to attempt a diplomatic breakthrough. The most critical need of countries in Northeast Asia is an institution for crisis prevention, crisis management, and other security-promoting purposes—what might be called a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue Mechanism (NEASDM). It would be an outgrowth of the Six Party Talks, where all the parties twice agreed (in 2005 and 2007) to create such a mechanism. The Russian Federation, as the country charged by the 6PT with chairing the working group on a regional security mechanism, is best situated to initiate creation of a NEASDM, *whether or not the 6PT resume*. Those talks have focused on only one issue: how to denuclearize North Korea while meeting its security and energy needs. But the nuclear issue is not the only source of insecurity in Northeast Asia. The threat of open conflict is real enough that a regional mechanism, geared to discussion of a wide range of security issues—economic, maritime, environmental, energy, and territorial, as well as nuclear—should be given separate and urgent consideration.

Russia's ambassador to Seoul, Konstantine Vnukov, said on December 7, 2010: "Russia is currently considering the very serious situation around the Korean Peninsula and asking countries to prevent further escalation. Parties concerned should avoid behavior that could be misinterpreted because military action can escalate quickly." That concern is precisely what drives this proposal. Since there are no outside honest brokers for disputes in Northeast Asia, the NEASDM can function as a "circuit breaker," able to interrupt patterns of escalating confrontation when tensions in the region increase—as they are now.

How might the NEASDM actually work? Following are some specifics:

First, all six countries in the 6PT should be members, but no others, although other countries or organizations might be invited to participate for a specific session. Second, the NEASDM should be institutionalized, perhaps situated in Beijing, with a commitment to meet several times a year at regular intervals regardless of the state of affairs in the region—but with the provision that any of the parties can convene a meeting in a crisis. Third, there should be an understanding among the member-states that the NEASDM meets whether or not all parties are willing to participate so that a boycott by one party cannot prevent the group from meeting. Fourth, the NEASDM's agenda should be unrestricted; the members should be prepared to discuss any issue that any one of them believes is important.

What might a Northeast Asia SDM discuss? It should be open to a wide range of political and security issues, such as a code of conduct to govern territorial and boundary disputes, military budget transparency, weapons transfers and deployments, terrorism, and piracy. Normalization of relations among all six countries should be a priority; full recognition of the DPRK by the United States and Japan costs nothing but is an important incentive for meaningful North Korean participation. Creating a nuclear-weapon free zone (NWFZ) in all or part of Northeast Asia is an especially worthy agenda item. Environmental, labor, poverty, and public health issues also merit discussion, as well as measures to support confidence building and trust in the dialogue process itself.

A NEASDM would bring decided advantages to each party. For example, North Korea would gain diplomatic recognition (and thus added legitimacy), access to long-term economic development assistance, and the potential for security guarantees by the major powers sufficient for it to eliminate its nuclear weapons, if not immediately then later—a lasting legacy for Kim Jong Il. Its nuclear weapons would not be the sole object of



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debate, or even the first order of business, making agreement on other issues more likely. The NEASDM could be the setting for North Korea and the United States to reiterate their pledge in 1999 of "no enmity" or "hostile intent," possibly paving the way for officially ending the state of war on the Korean peninsula that has existed since the 1953 armistice. China, South Korea, and possibly Russia could then join the U.S. and North Korea in signing a peace treaty.

South Korea would gain security from a denuclearized peninsula and more stable relations with the North, as well as new economic opportunities that would flow from greater regional integration. For China, the NEASDM would ease concerns about the Korean nuclear situation. In the same way that its relations evolved with the ROK, the new mechanism would probably create expanded economic opportunities in Northeast Asia. China and Japan would have a new forum for discussing their disputes and building trust, starting with ways to avoid another confrontation at sea. Japan might also find the NEASDM a useful way to balance its foreign-policy dependence on the United States while seeking common ground with China and South Korea on territorial issues. Stabilization of inter-Korean relations, greatly reducing the threat of chaos or war, would also be in Japan's interest. Russia would have an opportunity to enhance its claim to a leadership role in Northeast Asia. It would also gain added security from an agreement on nuclear weapons and the availability of a new channel for resolving territorial differences with Japan.

In the long run, the United States might benefit the most from this new security mechanism. It would be able to reduce its costly military presence in Northeast Asia and end the longstanding policy of extended nuclear deterrence while expecting improved military transparency from China and North Korea. In fact, the need for military alliances and bases, and for nuclear weapons for deterrence, would be significantly reduced if the NEASDM proved successful.

The biggest obstacle to establishing a security dialogue mechanism based on multilateral cooperation and new security undertakings with North Korea may be domestic politics rather than incompatible national interests or even specific policy differences. Japanese leaders will have to deal with the unresolved question of abductees in North Korea and with pressures to isolate and weaken Pyongyang. President Obama will have to justify to a skeptical, if not hostile, Congress why he is abandoning "strategic patience" (i.e., sticks) and returning to engagement (i.e., carrots). In China, party-state leaders will have to convince hard-liners in the military and the foreign-policy establishment that they are not abandoning North Korea or caving in to the United States. South Korea may be the toughest sell, for the Lee administration has seemed to be aiming at regime change in the North—and since *Cheonan* has had to deal with public sentiment in favor of getting even tougher with Pyongyang.

In all these cases, political leaders will have to make clear that the present tensions in Northeast Asia are being ratcheted up by military actions, yet cannot be resolved by force or pressure. To the contrary, only political engagement has the potential to avert a war, not by dialogue alone but also by providing incentives to all the parties to think in terms of common security.

A NEASDM might finally bring strategic stability and peaceful relations to a region that is on the edge. But it will take acts of political courage to confront rising nationalism and historic grievances that generate mistrust. Are today's leaders capable of such acts? There are precedents in Asia: Mao's decision to welcome Nixon to China; the visits to Pyongyang of Jimmy Carter and Madeleine Albright in the



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1990s; and the summit meetings of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun with Kim Jong Il. With the threat of war very real, by miscalculation if not by design, the time for statesmanship—for engaging enemies and dampening rivalries—is at hand.

*Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University, and Editor-in-Chief of* Asian Perspective*, published in Seoul. His most recent book is* Global Politics in the Human Interest*, 5th ed. (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). With Peter Van Ness, he is the co-editor of Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Political Views from the Asia-Pacific.* *He thanks Peter Van Ness and Mark Selden for valuable comments.*

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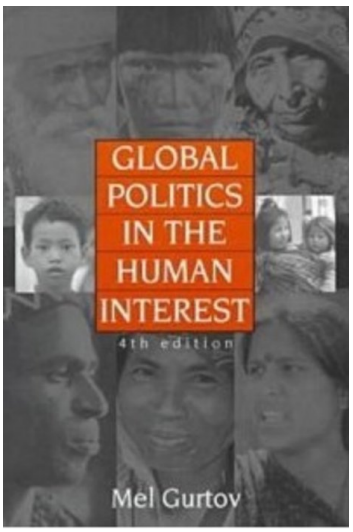


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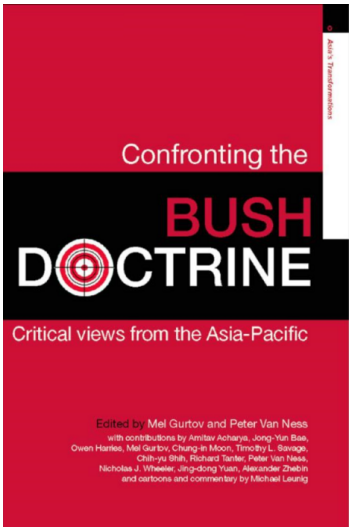




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